"WE ARE A GLOBAL PEOPLE"

An overview of the development of UFMCC in some areas outside of the North American continent. Prepared for the course "UFMCC Polity", by Rev. Elder Willem Hein.

Although we often say that we, as UFMCC, are around the globe, our consciousness is often limited to our immediate areas. This I think is a natural process, and no different from other areas of our lives, or the lives of other people. While we retain a consciousness of other parts of the world, which is fed by television reporting and our own internal media, such as "Global Outreach" or "Keeping in Touch", we also are in constant tension about how much we should know, and how much we should be involved in other parts of the globe where UFMCC exists or is asked to go. Some of that may not be resolved until we have a healthier appreciation of the paradigmatic shifts in concepts around missiology, evangelism, and global equity/unity, and will remain in constant tension which, after all, my not be such a bad thing. In the meantime however, it is important that we who are involved in the government and development of UFMCC, at whatever levels, have an understanding that all of UFMCC is the same and yet not the same, that our understanding of UFMCC and theology as a process, may vary widely, depending on how we came into UFMCC.

This paper is meant to provide an overview of some areas where UFMCC is present. Written in 1993/94, it is by no means exhaustive and does not cover the USA, while minimally touching on Canada. It is a paper that has some history (predominantly related to Australia and New Zealand), and my views are shaped by much of my ministry time there. In addition, my work with the poor, the disadvantaged and people often dependent, has shaped my theology and concepts around what UFMCC should be and where it should be going. Thus, the views expressed in this paper hopefully coincide with a new ethos in UFMCC. I take responsibility for those views, and especially where they may not be official UFMCC policy or process. The joy and miracle is that I have the freedom to express them, and to be able to be a critic from within, who recognizes (hopefully in balance) the need for UFMCC to be constantly in reform while celebrating its journey thus far.

The following thus, is a short history and present journey of various areas of UFMCC that truly make us a global people.

AUSTRALIA

The church in Australia was begun with independent groups. Individual groups in Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane, were all concerned about homosexual law reform and the developing debate over homosexuality and scripture. Groups, such as in Adelaide, began as early as 1972, and, by 1974, when Rev. Elder Troy Perry and Rev. Lee Carlton visited Australia there was a well defined structure and communication. These groups were independent of one another, and had a sense of ecumenism about them.

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Following Rev. Elder Perry's visit, each of the above groups decided to seek affiliation with UFMCC, and by late 1975, additional people in places such as Newcastle, as well as across the Tasman Sea in Auckland (see New Zealand) were ready to join together for a conference. Rev. Lee Carlton, seeking the leading of the Holy Spirit, was elected as Pastor in Sydney, and over New Year, 1975/76, the first conference of the new (no clear regulations on forming Districts then) District of Australasia, comprising Australia and New Zealand was formed.

As a new venture in the church world, MCC in Australasia attracted much attention, especially for an area of the world where religion played no great part. In Australia, when the white people arrived, the church had been part of the dominant, and dominating establishment, holding convicts in suppression, and participating in depressing the Aborigines, who were seen as non-human. The collusion of the Church thus made it a place that was untrustworthy - a "folk" thinking that remains part of the Australian mentality at some levels, even though the church as a whole has moved into major areas of social justice and choosing for the poor.

For MCC in Australia however, the "gay rights" cause was seen to be its base, as with many other MCC's around the world ar that time. It cannot be denied that, while providing a pastoral, theological and spiritual service to the community, MCC in the 70's was also a fashionable place to be. Its growth was thus in one way for political purposes, while culturally people took time to assess what MCC's spiritual message was for their lives.

The 1980's saw changes in the churches as Australians, as a people, and nation, asserted its independence. If we are to be honest, then we must face that all was not always well in UFMCC, especially from the Australian perspective. American clergy pastoring in Australia had brought both excellent and not-so-good ministries which fit in with the culture. Culture shock and culture clashes as to how things were done, became part of the dialogue and sometimes confrontation, between those in charge in UFMCC and the Australian churches. This ranged from CCCC's expectations that Australian student clergy meet US standards in US settings (such as attending Orientation) to the Board of Elders splitting the District and creating New Zealand as a Church Extension Area, with no formal consultation with the full District.

But a further issue, that has dogged, and in my opinion continues to dog Australia, is its vastness, which leads to great expenses in communication, and hounds issues such as face-to-face training and development. The focus for Australia was the District Conference, and this annual event continues to be the place where leadership meets. But the busy schedule of what must be done, often leaves little time for reflection or training opportunities. Since 1986, some of this has been resolved by Australian Samaritan Education's commitment to training and educating. However, the ability to start up new groups in some ways is hampered by an inability to simply fly somewhere without a major impact on the budget of the District. Some major urban centers where MCC could be a possibility, are literally over 1000 miles away from a nearest MCC. That calls for creative

thinking and a continued commitment which I, as a former District Coordinator, have not found lacking. But we also are always dealing with the question of when does volunteering (on the part of many leaders) lead to volunteerism (and subsequent burnout).

In the 1990's, Australians have continued to be creative, recognizing that growth may have to happen closer to existing MCC's, while at the same time carefully dealing with inquiries about MCC further from home bases. There is, in my discussions with ASE and District leadership, a growing awareness that a land the size of Australia does have limitations, but the recognition of those can lead to realistic planning for growth, rather than defeat. At its "height", if you only go by numbers, Australia consisted of some 11 churches or groups. At the time of this writing (1993/94) there are seven, as well as an autonomous ASE program. Yet, it is my opinion that the quality of leadership has grown, and will continue to grow in the reflection of what an Australian church might look like or have to offer. In 1988 I wrote an article "Looking For An Australian Church". In 1993, I believe that Australianness in the church, is a recognition that MCC cannot afford to cloister itself, but in its growing and contribution must work with other MCC's globally, but more importantly with other churches and faith groups within Australia to see journeying together as a new way to bring Good News to all.

NEW ZEALAND

New Zealand is informally called Aotearoa New Zealand, combining Maori and English names for the country. Maori people have been in New Zealand for some 1000 years, other cultures (especially European) since the early 19th century. In 1840, a treaty, the Treaty of Waitangi, was signed between the representatives of the British queen, Victoria, and leaders of many of the Maori tribes. That treaty (which had semantic differences in the Maori and English versions, leading to oppression and inequity) has had a major effect on New Zealand life in the last two decades, as governments have been forced to move to total ratification of it by social pressure and through the electoral process.

New Zealand is thus becoming bi-cultural and an important aspect of this is found in understanding Maori language and others in what it means to live in New Zealand, and be a leader in the Christian community. Further influences in recent decades have come from migration from other Polynesian nations especially in the south-west Pacific. Auckland, a city of 1 million (and also a third of the New Zealand population) is the largest Polynesian city in the world, yet it is not always noticeable in everyday life.

MCC in New Zealand was founded in 1975, and in the first four years, was closely linked with its brother and sister MCC's in Australia. Its relative isolation meant it had to rely on outside pastoral leadership, and although it had an MCC pastor (Rev. Peter Alexander-Smith) for about 18 months, his sudden death in late 1978 again threw the church on outside resources.

Late in 1979, the Board of Elders decided to create New Zealand as a Church Extension Area. The resulting consequences of this action were indicative of the challenges that face

the global expansion of any religion or denomination. First of all, to what degree should indigenous peoples be consulted, in this case New Zealand, in a decision such as this one. Secondly, creating New Zealand as a Church Extension Area loosened what had been important ties with Australian churches. Third, there were cultural clashes between American clergy who had been sent to pastor and co-ordinate Church Extension efforts and indigenous church peopled who felt a protective ownership of hard-earned church resources. The end result was total misunderstanding of how a church should be built, with no reconciliation. In the end groups emerged. One, an independent Auckland Community Church, continues today under various voluntary clergy from several denominations. The other continued as a new MCC and evolved into MCC Auckland.

Aotearoa New Zealand is a country set in splendid isolation, free from many pollution problems and other population issues that beset more populated areas of the world. It is, and remains, a country that has some of the most beautiful scenery in the world. But New Zealand's position geographically, has had pluses and minuses. For MCC it has been mostly on the minus side. After its move into Church Extension, little attention was paid to it during the 1980's. Any attention cost time and money and the result has been that there was not much growth. New groups were attempted in South Auckland (1985) and Rotorua (1988) with little success and minimally trained leadership. It often appeared difficult to get concise information on various training aspects from UFMCC and the church in New Zealand lacked motivated leadership except at the local level. Their full-time secular work left little time for furthering MCC beyond the local church.

In 1988, the arrival of a new pastor who was required (by immigration law) to be fully supported by the local church, gave some opportunity for growth, but unfortunately, again the differences between US and New Zealand upbringing meant that church growth was not always sustainable. No real long term commitments were made and the church fluctuated. During this time a new group was begun in Christchurch, but its distance from the parent body in Auckland (some 700 miles) and the fluctuating New Zealand economy made regular travel prohibitive. Never fully understanding the message and processes of UFMCC, the group, which in three years grew minimally, decided to disaffiliate in October 1993. In February 1993 a new Mission Outreach was started in Hamilton, some 80 miles south of Auckland. Again, as with Australia, it appears that either close contact with a parent body or members of the Church Extension Committee, or strong independent leadership with full MCC training, is the way to start/grow churches here.

A further aspect is that, like Australia, the myth of being seen as a "Christian" nation is being broken. The reality that only about 3% of the population attend church, along with the homophobic "Christian" protests by some mainline churches over homosexual law reform in 1985, has had a marked influence on MCC's ability to be more effective in the community. Recent events have also shown that leadership that is visible must work with integrity, be will educated, and have a full understanding of MCC and its theological position within the national and cultural context of New Zealand. With a population of some 3 million people, New Zealand does have further MCC opportunities, but an important fact is that, unless there is a strong infrastructure of training, leadership and consistency, MCC is limited to its present process.

EUROPE

MCC in Europe began in England (see "The Beginning of MCC in England") and grew to initially include churches in that country and in Denmark. Working under the auspices of World Church Extension for a number of years, the European countries where MCC was, were gathered together into a new European North Sea District (ENSD) in 1985, with Rev. Bob Arthur as its first District Coordinator. The development and growth in the ENSD has always had unique challenges. There were several languages to consider (English, Danish, German and since 1992, French), different national requirements for each group and the changing structure of Europe itself.

While initially growth was slow, recent years have seen a dramatic rise in new groups, various ministries and the development of a Samaritan program that is now Samaritan College in Europe, seeking to meet not only English-speaking needs, but eventually also to offer courses in other major European languages. This, and the operation in the District itself, has meant a commitment to understanding each other beyond just translation, but understanding differing needs in countries where there is a minimal church-going population. Here too, there have been painful recognitions that the American way does not work everywhere, and that the British way may not work on the Continent. However, my own experience of the ENSD as a visitor, has been that here is a place where UFMCC can look to get first hand experience of what it is like to be a global church in microcosm, especially as the ENSD, together with WCE reaches out to other east European countries not as well off as Western Europe.

NIGERIA

The church in Nigeria was begun in the early 1970's, as a result of one person issuing anti MCC leaflets. Some recipients liked our statement of faith and that we were a church for all people. They wrote to UFMCC, took UFMCC at its word, and went to grow a church that, numerically, is possibly one of the largest in the Fellowship.

Yet, with the exception of being placed within the WCE budget, Nigeria has had not as much attention as is possible, and we must continue to ask not only why, but how this can be changed. The church is predominantly heterosexual, poor, black, and among a disposed people (the Ibo), who attempted in the 1960's to secede as an independent state of Biafra, from Nigeria. This failed attempt led to slaughter and bloodshed in a civil war that has left effects on the Ibo people in a land mainly governed through military rule.

Nigeria, unlike other World Church Extension Areas and Districts, has been visited by UFMCC leadership only once up to 1993, and is a symbolic indicator in many ways of how we must rethink the global nature of our Fellowship. We must think of ways that our family there can become equal partners and co-creators. We must think of ways, in consultation with them, that enables them to be part of how we govern ourselves. We must constantly find ways in which their voices can be heard, not through existing power structures, but

within their own right. Nigeria, to me, often says everything about how we might wish to change our global thinking and activity and how unwilling we are to effect that sometimes. Nigeria lives in hope of being a total part of UFMCC. My hope is the day will come when we can fulfill that with them.

CANADA

What can I say about Canada? I have had the privilege of traveling all of the District of Western Canada, and visiting Toronto in Eastern Canada. Its vastness reminds me of Australia, and I was struck in Western Canada with the similarities in challenges that face that District and Australia.

While its immediate neighbor, Canada is definitely not the USA and anyone who assumes that what works in the USA must work in Canada already starts with an attitude that offends. Initially a District as a whole country, it too has had to deal with the process of being divided into two Districts with minimal consultation, over a decade ago. I still wonder what impact such a process has had, and what the vastness of the land, and the assumed expectations of "being just like America" has had on development in some areas. Canada also shows, like Australia, that population dispersal can enhance or work against leadership and training, and that we are in constant tension between globalism and parochialism.

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I have not spoken in this paper of places such as Mexico, Argentina, the past in Indonesia or the future in Poland, where MCC works in a different way. I have attempted to cover in this paper some of the symbolic history of places where UFMCC has existed and exists, and through it to present a picture that communicates to all of us in UFMCC. We do not know how difficult it must be to live in Buenos Aires, be Coordinator of Church Extension for South America, live thousands of miles from the nearest MCC and face homophobia on an everyday level. But we do know that, if we are to be a global church, we are in need of reform, and, as a process church, will always be in need of reform to meet the global needs that retain local and cultural integrity and yet provide for full participation.

Can we do it? I believe we can, but it will cost us in commitment. Yet, that commitment is not always as high as we think. For example, in 1993, by the raising of $25 per person, we were able to extend an invitation to participate in the General Conference government of UFMCC to almost all voting delegates and some observers. That is a start, but let us not rest there. We are called to be on a journey and, as a global people, must always be open to how the Spirit leads us on that journey, traveling together as a global people.

What, in summary, then are some of the issues that we will have to look at as we, in whatever form in the future, continue to celebrate both our individuality and our universality.

Here are some:

1) We need to begin to understand that the message of the Good News in Jesus Christ varies as much in its presentation and interpretation between our countries and cultures, as it did for the early church in its first two centuries. That is still valid.

2) We need to recognize that we live in two hemispheres, and that differing seasons and times are beginning to have an effect on how we theologize and celebrate major Christian occurrences (e.g. our Easter celebrations and the associated psychology/theology of "spring" and "all things new" in the northern hemisphere compared with the theology of fall/autumn and "enwombing" in the southern hemisphere).

3) Our ability to understand that the church can be diverse in government and administration and yet be one.

4) That the reality of how a country operates and what it offers or does not offer to its citizens, will have a dramatic effect on education levels and all other matters that give leadership "status" in UFMCC.

5) Our willingness not to create second-class citizenship, whether by active or passive process, in areas that at present cannot/do not participate in the direct government of UFMCC. This means a financial, emotional, moral and spiritual commitment to equality.

6) A willingness to place some "controls" over how clergy go out to create their version of MCC, and major study of implications before an official MCC is created in a new country.

7) A facing of our own innate "isms" that may keep some areas from being full participants, because we expect them to meet our requirements, rather than adjusting our requirements to facilitate global government and the local spreading of Christ's Good News.

We are a people of possibility, whose task is nowhere near finished. If in some ways, we are the new reformation, we must ensure that it is not just an old reformation revisited. This means change, and change is a condition that is often resisted by our being human. Yet God calls us to go on for, as part of the Body of Christ, we all need to learn to "share the body", acknowledge our interdependence, and yet also appreciate and celebrate the cultural, geographical and individual uniqueness that makes us the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches.